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AUTHOR Kalyan-Masih, V.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

People tend to have such lofty conceptions of love and marital happiness that little day-to-day simple acts of kindness are seldom considered. This study investigated specific, repetitive, small daily acts that strengthen marriage, and little acts that disturb a stable relationship. Participants (N=57) were individuals who had been happily married for 30-51 years, with an age range of 48-82 years, and an educational level from 10-20 years of schooling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews consisting of 21 direct and open-ended questions. Results showed that the smallest acts such as smiling, touching, looking, hugging, and saying "thank you" and "I love you," helped couples to: (1) maintain and continue their love relationship; (2) enhance their physical comfort and well-being; (3) encourage individual growth and enjoy shared togetherness; (4) keep special rituals and memories; (5) accept children and in-laws as extra bonuses; and (6) remove negative acts through open communication, humor, forgiveness, and courtesy. Results suggest a dynamic equilibration-equilibrium model. There is a continuous interaction between the organism (the couple) and the environment. The ebb and flow of the positive and negative helps maintain an open equilibrated system through self-regulatory activity of the couple. (Author/ABL)

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SMALLEST COINS OF MARITAL HAPPINESS

V. Kalyan-Masih; E. Stuart; & J. Higley, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska, U.S.A.

This study investigated specific, repetitive, small daily acts that strengthen marriages; and little splinters and thorns that disturb a stable relationship. Sample consisted of 57 individuals, happily married for 30-51 yrs., with age range of 48-82 yrs. and educational level, from 10-20 yrs. of schooling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews consisting of 21 direct and open-ended questions. The smallest acts or coins such as smiling, touching, looking, hugging, saying "thank you, I love you" etc. helped in: 1. Maintaining and continuing love relationship; 2. Enhancing physical comfort and well-being; 3. Encouraging individual growth and enjoying shared togetherness; 4. Keeping special rituals and memories; 5. Accepting children and in-laws as extra bonuses and; 6. Removing thorns and splinters through open communication, humor, forgiveness, and courtesy. A dynamic equilibration model (after Piaget) is suggested. There is continuous interaction between the organism (couple) and the environment (children, relatives, society, and crises events). The ebb and flow of +ve and -ve, coins and thorns, helps maintain an open equilibrated system through self-regulatory activity of the couple. The organism (couple) corrects and compensates for the disturbance by resorting to the smallest acts that have been helpful in the past. This might restore the initial equilibrium or raise it to a higher level, i.e. improve the quality of relationship. Or, the disequilibrium may incapacitate the organism for any self-corrective measure.

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# Smallest Coins of Marital Happiness

V. Kalyan Masih, E. Stuart, J. Higley

The idea for this research originated while watching the Donahue show on National TV in the USA. He interviewed some couples in show business who had been married to the same partner for more than twenty years. The couples gave various reasons - relevant to their own particular situation - for their long, happy and stable marriage. One of the participants said that her husband wrote poems for her. She read a recent one. The last line read something like this "and this is the least coin of happiness." This idea set the stage for this research on "Smallest Coins of Marital Happiness."

We have such lofty conceptions of love and marital happiness that we seldom think of it in terms of little day-to-day simple acts of kindness. Sidney Harris in one of his recent editorials in the Lincoln Journal commented,

> What we commonly call "love" is a lot of little things rather than one big thing. The big thing may bowl us over at first, but it is the repetitive regularity of the little things that keep love alive and afloat.... not necessarily heroic devotion and self-sacrifice, but many small matters that add up over the days and years.

We initiated an exploratory study for discovering smallest coins of happiness in long established marital relationships.

The objectives of the study were:

1. To find out specific, even repetitive, and small acts of daily living that strengthen marriage.
2. To find out little splinters, thorns, or regrets that disturb an otherwise stable marriage.
3. To gather some words of wisdom/advice from the long married and happy couples for the younger generation.

## Method

### Sample

Thirty-four senior citizens living at one of the senior citizen's centers in Lincoln, Nebraska agreed to participate in this study. In addition, twenty-three younger individuals from two local churches also volunteered. Thus the total available sample consisted of 57 individuals, 34 in the senior age group and 23 in the younger age group. Demographic information was summarized in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

For the senior group, age varied from 48-82 years and for the younger group, 26-51 years. All were in their first marriage, except for two in the senior group and one, in the younger group who were in their second marriage. The length of marriage varied from 30-57 years for the senior group and 2-37 years, for the younger group respectively. The number of children varied from 0-5, and 0-3; and the ages of living children varied from 24-56 years, and 2-36 years for senior and younger groups respectively. Three in the younger age group reported having "inadequate" income; the remaining in the two groups were "well off" or had "adequate" income. One in the senior and one in the younger age group reported as being "sometimes happy", but all the others reported as being "very happy" or "usually happy" in their marital relations.

### Instrument

To our best knowledge, a suitable research assessment instrument for our purposes was not available. We devised a structured interview questionnaire consisting of 21 items. Seven dealt with demographic information, such as age, length of marriage, number of children, level of education, income, and marital satisfaction etc. The

demographic information was summarized in Table 1 and was used above to describe the sample.

The remaining interview consisted of three types of items. First, direct questions such as, "Describe some small things/acts you did to contribute to your marital happiness yesterday/last month/last year/usually." The responses to such direct questions helped identify specific, even repetitive, and small acts of daily living that strengthen marriage -- which was the first objective of this study. Second, some indirect and open ended questions were asked -- "I wish I...", "I wish s/he...", or "If only I...", "If only s/he...". The responses to these indirect questions identified little splinters, thorns, or regrets that disturbed an otherwise stable marriage -- which was the second objective of the study. Third, some items solicited free comments or "words of wisdom" for the young couples -- which was the third objective of the study.

The interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed upon time and place. All of the interviews, except for the mail-in abbreviated questionnaire to the younger sample, lasted for about an hour and were taped as well as hand recorded.

Findings

Because of the exploratory nature of the investigation the data analysis is descriptive, qualitative, and not quantitative per sê. The next phase of the study will use a revised mail-in type of questionnaire, incorporating these findings and which, it is hoped, will be more amenable to a rigorous quantitative type of analysis.

A. The first objective of this study was to find out specific, even repetitive, and small acts of day to day living that strengthen marriage. We call these small acts, "smallest coins."

Responses that showed a similar pattern or trend were grouped together. From these groupings or sortings emerged seven clusters of specific, repetitive small acts of daily living or what we have called the smallest coins of marital happiness. These seven clusters or smallest coins of marital happiness derived from the responses to the direct questions of the questionnaire focused on:

1. Continuing and maintaining love relationship.
2. Enhancing mutual physical comfort and well-being.
3. Growing and developing -- together and apart.
4. Keeping the communication channels open.
5. Celebrating special rituals and remembering special times.
6. Nurturing roots of marital happiness -- patience, tolerance, forgiveness, humor, appreciation, acceptance etc.
7. Accepting extra bonuses that come with marriage -- children, relatives, and in-laws.

These seven clusters are discussed below with pertinent protocols taken directly from the respondents'answers to the interview questionnaire.

1. Continuing and maintaining love relationship. They mentioned simple acts, words, or gestures that expressed mutual love in concrete and specific ways such as, hugging, kissing, or touching, or smiling. Love expressed verbally or nonverbally was very important. These are some of the excerpts from their responses:

--never leaves/returns without kissing.
--we never go to bed angry...sometimes we talk for hours...
--we always sleep in each other's arms.
--could not go to bed without hugging and nestling.
--he always scoops me in his arms when we go to bed.
--we sit close to each other when watching TV.
--squeezes my hand when we are alone driving.
--never part without a kiss.
--would always curl up around me and say 'I love you.'

--a good hug -- that is everyday living.
--there was never a night we went to bed mad.
--would look up from the other end of the table and give me a wink or a smile.
--physical attraction/sex is important but not everything.
--be creative in sex life.
--gives me a good hug, we do it all the time.
--he always pats me in the night when he wakes up.
--we say daily to each other "I love you."
--when I return home she caresses me.

2. Enhancing physical comfort and well-being of one another.

Most frequently mentioned were routinely mundane chores necessary for smooth day-to-day living such as doing errands; washing and putting away dishes; grocery shopping; snow removal; garden and yard work; fixing meals for each other; making beds; reminding each other about taking medicine or vitamins; getting up early to prepare baby's bottle or helping when children were small; washing and ironing clothes, taking garbage out, vacuuming. All of these simple and repetitive concrete acts imply mutual kindness, consideration, loving care, concern, and thoughtfulness for the physical comfort and well being of the other spouse.

--gets my slippers every night.
--he picks his own clothes.
--when I'm sick he makes me soup and tea.
--makes morning coffee.
--he rubs my back in the bath tub.
--he is a clean man, bathes, shaves, smells good.
--gives me breakfast in bed.
--she bakes my favorite pie even though she is allergic to flour.
--he is handy around the house.
--she helps me with the yard work.
--helps make bed.
--cooks my favorite food.
--mixes me a highball, it is our time to smooth out the day.
--he waits on me, it is an act of kindness.
--helps type school work, corrects spelling, every night.
--she packed my lunch for 37 years (husband diabetic).
--she had dinner on the table every day.
--he tried to make sure my car was in working order.
--washes dishes.
--makes breakfast.

3. Growing and developing -- together and apart. The couples said that they worked together, helped each other, but in their togetherness there was separateness and space between them to grow individually. The marriage compatibility grew in the couples' mutually accepted independence as well as in their shared togetherness.

--we recognize our differences and appreciate each other.
--freedom as well as companionship.
--willingness to do things together as well as separately...I do not worry about meals when I have to be out.
--he supported me if I wanted to do something. "Go for it", he would say.
--we both give and take.
--separate bathrooms: it allowed privacy.
--my policy is -- we can both be right.
--we worked in harmony -- no separate crises.
--we do not try to change each other.
--respect and admire each other.
--supportive of each other's professional and personal interests.
--sometimes I have to be myself, separate and independent.
--we respect each other's privacy.

The same idea of growing together as well as separately in marriage was beautifully expressed by Khalil Gibran in his book of poems, "The Prophet".

> But let there be spaces in your togetherness,
> And let the winds of the heavens dance between you...
> Sing and dance together and be joyous, but
> let each one of you be alone,
> Even as the strings of a lute are alone though
> they quiver with the same music...
> And stand together yet not too near together:
> For the pillars of the temple stand apart,
> And the oak tree and the cypress grow
> not in each other's shadow.

4. Keeping the channels open. This implies good communication -- talking things over in decision making, problem solving, and planning budget, trips, parties, special occasions.

--keep communication open. Talk over problems and success. Walk over the paths of life together.
--know each others likes and dislikes.
--we co-operate no matter what the situation.
--consider others' point of view. S/he has problems too.

--he doesn't worry (I go to pieces). He says, "When it comes time to worry, we'll both sit down and worry."
--always talked about finances.
--thought of changes as challenges.
--practice positive inputs.
--think before you speak.
--listen to the other.

5. Celebrating special rituals, and remembering special times.

--talk at night when we go to bed (she falls asleep).
--pray together loudly morning, evening.
--go to church regularly, Sunday school, church activities.
--mealtimes are special -- pray and talk.
--birthdays -- each member has to give a "verbal gift" e.g. "I like _____ because..." No put downs.
--always remembers anniversaries, special dates.
--vacations, camping rips, picnics with children.
--roses for birthday/anniversaries.
--bought me two dresses when I wanted one.
--always arranged for us to go out together -- arranged for babysitter for children.
--go fishing together once a week in the summer. He cleans the fish, I cook it.
--church is the center for us -- important part of our life.
--instead of a dozen roses, he gave me one a month for a year -- it became a special gesture over the years.
--holidays are always remembered, maybe not in a big way, but in a special way.
--our love life is so delightful.

6. Nurturing roots of marital happiness -- patience, tolerance,

forgiveness, humor, thoughtfulness, tender loving care,

acceptance and appreciation of each other in daily living.

--"Give me the sunshine of your smile" -- he would always sing to humor me.
--when they were just married he would say that they would live together until she was forty and then he would trade her in on two twenties. It was quite a joke between them. At forty she reminded him of the 'deal'. He responded, "Honey, I'm still looking and I can't find two twenties that will work as well as the old forty."
--perseverance through good or bad and rocky paths.
--looking at positive and humorous side of every situation.
--take time to smell roses in marriage.
--verbal appreciation, "thank you."
--respect each other.
--we never downgrade each other.
--have patience with each other.
--he is gentle, courteous.
--I let her know my whereabouts. Leave notes for each other.
--we trust each other.
--he is dependable, congenial.
--he is flexible. A good sense of co-operation.

--give your all with abandonment without strings attached.
--comforts her when she loses things -- "it isn't lost, it is just misplaced."
--doesn't gripe when I leave things around.
--right by my side during surgery/recovery.
--I love doing things for him because he makes it desirable and pleasant for me to do so.
--he waits on me. It is an act of kindness.
--he has common courtesy to an uncommon degree.

7. Accepting the other extra bonuses that come with marriage -- children, relatives, and in-laws. One significant aspect of a strong marriage is raising children to be good citizens, and maintaining harmonious social relationships with relatives and in-laws. This broader base of positive inter-relationships beyond the spousal bond strengthened marriage for these respondents.

All of these older respondents stated that one of the greatest accomplishments of their married life was that they managed to raise good children. They valued children. Children strengthened marriage through rocky times. Some of the younger respondents did mention that children produced some strain on their marriage and that they would have postponed having them.

--children make home more pleasant.
--strengthened marriage -- we went fishing, to picnics, and ball games as a family and had lots of fun.
--we were strict but we let them be independent.
--about in-laws -- mothers-in-law were often considered saints -- very helpful.
--a very special time for us was the arrival of our twins. I told my husband to sit down for the news (we had 3 older children already). He nearly collapsed. We kept it a secret for 10 days and then told the children. The anticipation, as a family, was wonderful.
--children are very important to us. We stressed education more than social life.
--fulfillment and satisfaction in life.

B. The second objective of this study was to identify splinters, thorns, or regrets that disturb an otherwise stable marriage.

Indirect and open-ended questions such as "I wish I...", "If only I...", elicited regrets or some hurts that festered, or thorns that pricked in an otherwise satisfactory relationship. There are ups and downs in every marriage. Some people forget the regrets and forgive the hurts; others, brood over them. We have reasons to believe that these respondents "forgot and forgave" the regrets, thorns, and the splinters and continued to live happily in harmony. Most of these statements are negatives of the seven clusters or dimensions discussed above.

--never compliments or appreciates me.
--not going to church or school functions with me and the children.
--his work always came first.
--had an affair with a young girl.
--took him a long time to call me by my first name. I had no identity except as "mom" for children.
--I never amounted to much.
--been more sympathetic.
--been more loving.
--saved more money.
--worst thing she does is to be late.
--house is messy sometimes, mail is everywhere.
--his patience will sometimes drive me crazy.
--he is sometimes more attentive to other women than makes me comfortable.

C. The third objective of the study was to glean some words of wisdom from the concrete life experiences of the respondents which could be passed on to the younger generations. This is suggestive of Erikson's eighth psychosocial stage of integrity vs. despair with its emerging positive ideological, but down to earth philosophy of "wisdom" rooted in real life experiences. The older respondents suggested a few ground rules that had worked for them. These primarily focused on love, finances, communication, and commitment to the total well being of each other.

--tell her you love her over and over.
--don't ever go to bed without making up.
--share, love, and be tolerant.
--give your all -- make the other person happy.

--fall in passion but grow in love.
--love one another regardless.
--work at your love life; ours has continued to improve.
--have a clear understanding of finances and agree on major purchases.
--don't live beyond your means.
--talk about everything.
--keep lines of communication open.
--give and take.
--take a good look at yourself before criticizing.
--be honest with each other.
--get married with the intention of having a long married life.
--ignore the sharp words.

## Conclusion

This preliminary research on the smallest coins of marital happiness has led us to propose a dynamic equilibration-equilibrium model of marital happiness. This term has been borrowed from the genetic-epistemology of Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist. According to Piaget, during the course of cognitive growth, there is continuous interaction between the organism and the environment. This interaction involves disturbance/disequilibrium emanating from internal or external sources. The organism, through self-regulatory process of active adjustment and compensation seeks to restore the initial equilibrium, modify it, or raise it to a higher level. The disequilibrium gives way to equilibrium at the previous or at a higher level. In this case, the organism is the married couple; the environment includes home, finances, children, relatives, society at large. The smallest coins (small day-to-day repetitive acts) help maintain the open and equilibrated system; the splinters and thorns, disturb the system and create disequilibrium. The organism (the couple) corrects the disturbance by resorting to the smallest coins (specific activities) that have been helpful in the past. This restores the initial stability or raises the equilibrium to a higher level, which means that the quality of marital relationship has

improved. But if the disturbance is too destructive the organism will be incapacitated; the system will be disintegrated; or, the marital relationship will be broken.

No relationship is perfect. There are many small coins that have to be discovered or invented and used repeatedly. There are many thorns and splinters that have to be removed in order to restore initial equilibrium or to create a new one at a higher level. The human organism -- whether one speaks of an individual or of a couple -- has the potential for auto-regulation/self correction through the process of compensation. Marital relationship should be considered an open system where the organism and the environment interact, come into conflict, produce disturbance, but there is also potential for compensation and self-correction in the system itself.

It has been said, that if a man has greatness it shows in the legend of his daily activities. Our research indicates that if a couple has greatness in marital relationship or functions within an equilibrated model, then it shows in the legend of their daily activities. The best way to summarize "the smallest coins of marital happiness" is to quote Newell Dwight Hillis:

> Springs are little things, but they are sources of large streams, an acorn is a little thing, but from it can grow a forest of mighty oaks; nails and pegs are little things, but they hold the parts of a large building together; a word, a look, a smile, a frown -- are all little things, but powerful for good or evil. Think of this, and mind the little things.

Table 1

| | Senior Group | Younger Group |
|---|---|---|
| N | 34 | 23 |
| Age | 48-82 years | 26-51 years |
| No. of marriages | 32 in first marriage<br>2 in second marriage | 22 in first marriage<br>1 in second marriage |
| Length of marriage | 30-57 | 2-37 |
| No. of children | 0-5 | 0-3 |
| Ages of children | 24-56 | 2-36 |
| Education | 10-20 years<br>2 Masters | 12-20 years<br>3 Masters |
| Income | | |
| Well off | 8 | 4 |
| Adequate | 26 | 15 |
| Inadequate | 0 | 3 |
| Not available | 0 | 1 |
| Marital Happiness | | |
| Very happy | 28 | 14 |
| Usually happy | 5 | 7 |
| Sometimes happy | 1 | 1 |
| Not available | 0 | 1 |